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ABSTRACT

To examine black-white differences in the public's definitions of appropriate behavior toward a frail older parent for sons and daughters in dual earner couples, data were collected from a probability sample of 241 white and 64 black adults. Telephone interviews were used for data collection. Respondents were asked to rate the appropriateness of 13 filial behaviors toward a frail mother by a working child whose spouse also worked. In approximately one-half of the cases, the adult child was identified as a female; in the others the child was identified as a male. A similar manipulation was used with five questions concerning appropriate frequency of filial behavior. The results indicated that blacks were more likely than whites to believe it appropriate for children of both sexes to assist an elderly parent, even when control for level of educational attainment was introduced. Blacks more than whites thought that children with a frail elderly parent should have more contact with that parent, that adult children of both sexes should visit a mother at the mother's home more frequently, and that adult children of both sexes should bring meals to the mother more frequently. At the same time, they, like whites, attributed this responsibility to daughters more than to sons. The results of this study suggest that blacks are more likely to espouse norms prescribing higher degrees of responsibility concerning an elderly mother and higher levels of contact with such a parent, particularly for daughters. (LLL)

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BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES IN NORMS FOR SONS' AND DAUGHTERS' BEHAVIOR TOWARD A FRAIL OLDER PARENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examined black-white differences in the public's definitions of appropriate behavior for sons and daughters in dual earner couples toward a frail older parent. Data were collected from a probability sample of 241 white and 64 black adults residing in west Alabama using telephone interviews. Respondents were asked to rate the appropriateness of 13 filial behaviors in which a working child whose spouse also worked could engage toward a frail mother. In approximately one half of the cases, the adult child was identified as a female; in the others the child was identified as a male. A similar manipulation was used with 5 questions concerning appropriate frequency of filial behavior. The results of this study suggest that blacks were more likely to espouse norms prescribing higher degrees of responsibility concerning an elderly mother and higher levels of contact with such a parent, particularly for daughters.

BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES IN NORMS FOR SONS' AND DAUGHTERS' BEHAVIOR TOWARD A FRAIL OLDER PARENT

Gerontologists have been giving increasing attention to the role of adult children in providing support for their frail, older parents. Indeed, the focus of much current government policy is on attempting to strengthen the role of family members in helping the dependent aged. Since public policy for the frail elderly is set within the context of norms about who should do what to help the dependent aged, an understanding of current norms for filial behavior is becoming increasingly important.

There is a growing body of literature on norms or expectations for filial behavior (Brody, et al., 1984; Cicirelli, 1981; Hanson, et al., 1983; Kivett & Anderson, 1984; Seelbach, 1978; Seelbach & Sauer, 1977). Only a few studies (Hanson, et al.; Seelbach, 1978; Seelbach & Sauer, 1977), however, have considered racial variations which may exist in this domain. Some work has suggested that extended kin networks are stronger among blacks than among whites (e.g., Hays & Mindell, 1973), implying the existence of stronger filial responsibility norms among blacks. At the same time, black-white comparison studies which focused explicitly on endorsement of filial responsibility norms found either no differences between black and whites in norm endorsement (Seelbach, 1978; Seelbach & Sauer, 1977) or stronger support for filial norms among whites than among blacks (Hanson, et al., 1983). It should be noted, however, that the data reported in these studies were collected over a decade ago in metropolitan areas in the north.

The purpose of this study was to expand on previous work on race differences in filial responsibility norms. The study differs from prior work on this subject in several ways. First, explicit attention was given to the characteristics of adult children who might be expected to render assistance to an older parent. Control was introduced for sex of the adult child in recognition of the fact that females have historically borne the burden for care of infirm elderly family members (Brody, 1984). In addition, the study specifically took into account the reality that both partners in the majority of black and white couples work outside the home, a factor of increasing importance for policymakers (Federal Council on the Aging, 1984). Second, filial responsibility norms were measured using an extended series of specific behavioral statements concerning how help might be rendered. Finally, data were gathered in a small southern city and surrounding rural areas, a context quite different from those of previous studies.

METHODS OF STUDY

The data for the study were gathered from a probability sample of 241 white and 64 black adults residing in west Alabama in the fall of 1983. The data collection method employed was telephone interviewing using a two stage sampling procedure with random digit dialing. Forty-five percent of the whites and 40% of the blacks were between the ages of 30 and 59, and 17% of the whites and 23% of the blacks were 60 or older. The sample was biased in two ways. First, there was a somewhat higher representation of females in the black than in the white

sample (64% of the blacks and 57% of the whites were female). Second, the blacks studied were more likely to have somewhat lower socioeconomic status than were the whites studied (46% of the whites compared with 40% of the blacks had family incomes of less than $25,000 and 17% of the whites compared with 25% of the blacks had less than a high school education). To minimize the effects of this second bias, between race comparisons were made after controlling for the effects of level of educational attainment. Simultaneous control for income was not employed because of the nonresponse rate to the income question (18% for whites and 23% for blacks).

We were interested in learning the types of behavior that respondents thought adult children should engage in with respect to a dependent older parent. To this end, all respondents were presented with the following brief vignette describing an elderly woman who would appear to have some need of assistance to continue to function adequately:.

"Mrs. Smith is a 75 year old widow who lives alone in her own house. Recently her eyesight and arthritis have become so bad that she has given up driving. Her mind is good, but she is becoming more and more forgetful. She gets by financially on her social security but has little money for extras."

Approximately half of the respondents (122 whites and 29 blacks) were given the following additional information about Mrs. Smith: "Mrs. Smith has one child, a daughter, who lives within 5 miles of her. Her daughter is married, and both she and her husband work full time." The remainder of the respondents (119 whites and 35 blacks) were told that

the sole child was a married son who lived within 5 miles of her and that both he and his wife worked full time.

This part of the vignette had two purposes. The first was to force the respondents to take into account explicitly the contingent circumstances (Seelbach, 1978) of a sole adult child in a dual earner marriage as they assessed filial responsibility expectations. The manipulation of whether the sole child was a son or a daughter was included to test whether behavioral expectations for daughters differed from those for sons when marital and employment status for both sexes of the hypothetical child were held constant.

Respondents were then presented with a list of 13 statements about things the daughter (son) might do concerning the mother (see Table 1) and asked whether the child "definitely should," "probably should," "probably shouldn't," or "definitely shouldn't" do each thing. Five additional statements (see Table 2) were presented, and respondents were asked to rate how frequently the child should do each thing (daily, about weekly, about monthly, less than monthly, not at all).

RESULTS

While Hanson and her colleagues (1983), found only weak endorsement for filial responsibility norms, respondents to this study of both races appeared to believe it appropriate for adult children to be actively involved in the life of a dependent parent. No fewer than 80% or more indicated that it was at least somewhat appropriate for the adult child to engage in each of the first 8 activities listed on Table 1. These

activities range from encouraging the mother to seek better medical care to providing the mother with extra spending money and included providing the mother with transportation and helping with house and yard work. Also, 99% of the respondents believed that the adult child should call the mother at least weekly, and 69% believed the child should call daily. Only 3 of the activities were judged to be inappropriate: tell the mother the child doesn't like her friends, insist the mother come live with the child, and put the mother in a nursing home.

Also in contrast to Hanson's findings, the results of this study strongly suggest blacks were more likely than whites to believe it appropriate for children of both sexes to assist an elderly parent, even when control for level of educational attainment was introduced. When expectations for daughters were considered, in all 13 cases blacks were more likely than whites to prescribe a higher degree of involvement, and in four cases the differences were statistically significant (see Table 1). When the potential helper was a son, blacks prescribed higher involvement than did whites in 10 of the 13 comparisons, and in two cases the differences were statistically significant.

More specifically, blacks were more likely than whites to believe it appropriate for children of both sexes to take over management of a mother's finances (see Table 1). Blacks were also more likely than whites to indicate that daughters should insist that an elderly mother share the child's home, express negative opinions concerning a mother's friends, and encourage a mother to socialize with single men. Finally, blacks were more likely than whites to indicate that sons should help an elderly mother find social agencies which could assist with

transportation and housekeeping.

This pattern of results suggests that blacks might expect adult children to be more closely involved with elderly parents than do whites. At the same time, despite substantially lower rates of institutionalization among older blacks than among older whites (Kart & Beckham, 1976), blacks in this study were no less likely than whites to believe the mother in the hypothetical situation should be placed in a nursing home. This suggests that when a parent becomes dependent, blacks may prefer a more family centered intervention than do whites. It may also mean, given the low overall endorsement of this item, that respondents of both races did not believe the woman described in the vignette to be sufficiently dependent to require nursing home care.

When frequency of contact was examined, race differences were more pronounced (see Table 2). In all cases but one, blacks thought that children with a frail elderly parent should have more contact with that parent than did whites. Further, in four of the five cases when the potential helper was a daughter and in three of the five cases when the potential helper was a son the differences were statistically significant. Blacks believed adult children of both sexes should visit a mother at the mother's home more frequently than did whites. Blacks also believed adult children of both sexes should bring meals to the mother more frequently than did whites. At the same time, they, like whites, attributed this responsibility to daughters more than to sons. Blacks believed that daughters should invite the mother to visit at their homes and do fun things with the mother more frequently than did whites. Finally, blacks believed that sons should call a mother on the

telephone more frequently than did whites. These findings are consistent with those of Hays and Mindell (1973) who suggested that contact with kin is more extensive among blacks than among whites and with those of Dilworth-Anderson (1981) who found that 65% of nearby black sons and daughters visited their parents daily.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings of this study suggested that blacks subscribed to norms prescribing a higher degree of adult child involvement with a frail, older parent's life than did whites. Blacks were more likely to believe children should assume substantial responsibility for a dependent parent's affairs, particularly when the children were daughters. Thus, blacks were more likely than whites to indicate that daughters and sons should "take over management of mother's finances," but did not differ from whites in the degree to which they believed children of either sex should "advise mother on financial affairs." Blacks also were more likely than whites to believe that adult children should engage in more frequent contact with such a parent. This finding is consistent with work suggesting that blacks prefer to maintain closer ties with their aged parents than do whites.

Two cautions should be noted in attempts to generalize from these findings. First, the stimulus vignette purposively specified a widowed mother as the older parent, since dependent older persons are considerably more likely to be female than male. Had the stimulus vignette specified an older widower (or a frail, married couple), the

findings may well have been different. Second, the study was conducted in the deep south in an area with rural traditions. Thus the differences between these findings and some others which have been reported may well reflect regional differences.

However, if adult children feel bound to act in accordance with the norms of the cultural group to which they belong, one might expect black children to feel they should assume greater responsibility for maintaining contact and providing assistance than white children.

Table 1. Mean scores of perceptions of appropriate filial behavior of daughters and sons by race adjusted by level of educational attainment.[a]

	Responsbility of daughter		Responsibility of son	
Item	White	Black	White	Black
Encourage mother to get better medical attention.	1.39	1.24	1.49	1.30
Encourage mother to become active in senior citizens' activities.	1.39	1.34	1.37	1.33
Drive mother shopping, to church and to social events.	1.48	1.43	1.44	1.43
Help mother find social agencies which could assist with transportation and housekeeping.	1.48	1.42	1.53	1.24[1]
Help mother do her housework.	1.60	1.39	2.09	2.00
Advise mother on financial affairs	1.71	1.70	1.68	1.49
Do the yardwork for mother.	1.93	1.90	1.57	1.70
Give mother extra spending money.	1.97	1.90	1.99	2.11
Encourage mother to socialize with single men her own age.	2.49	1.88[1]	2.40	2.72
Take over management of mother's finances.	2.62	2.15[1]	2.73	2.24[1]
Insist mother come to live with child.	3.10	2.28[1]	3.06	3.00
Tell mother when doesn't like mother's friends.	3.31	2.72[1]	3.18	3.04
Place mother in a nursing home.	3.31	3.21	3.27	3.18

[a] Scored 1 = definitely should; 4 = definitely shouldn't

[1] The difference between black-white means is statistically significant using a one-way analysis of covariance, alpha < .05.

Table 2. Mean frequency scores for filial behavior of daughters and sons by race adjusted by level of educational attainment.[a]

	Responsbility of daughter		Responsibility of son	
Item	White	Black	White	Black
Call mother on the telephone.	1.27	1.19	1.40	1.16[1]
Visit mother at mother's home.	1.90	1.40[1]	1.90	1.52[1]
Carry meals to mother.	1.96	1.29[1]	2.23	1.75[1]
Invite mother to visit at child's home.	2.20	1.88[1]	2.19	2.25
Do "fun" things with mother like going to a movie or out for lunch.	2.33	1.98[1]	2.47	2.29

[a] Scored 1 = daily; 5 = not at all.

[1] The difference between black-white means is statistically significant using a one-way analysis of covariance, alpha < .05.

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